

Chapter 12

Body, health and the universe – A polemic and critical review of youth health behaviour

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INTRODUCTION

Youth cultures and scenes can be understood both as means for identity building and stages for socialisation, and as platforms for and symbols of protest against adult society. Research on both forms has been carried out and it is obvious that identity creation and protest do not have to be exceptional, either in youth or in adulthood. This paper focuses mainly on the socialisation role of youth cultures and its impact on health behaviour, as well as on sustainable consumption. The short – and cynical – version of it might be: even the best and socially most preferred behaviour has to be set on a stage and performed in front of an audience – or else it is not worth the effort.

YOUTH, IDENTITY AND SELF-(RE)PRESENTATION

Growing up was never an easy task. It always meant leaving the safe haven of childhood to reach the dull shores of adulthood by crossing a stormy sea of uncertainty – well, this is just a metaphor and should only set the stage to describe the challenges of youth. I by no means believe that childhood was ever safe for the majority of humankind, nor do I believe that adulthood is always boring (even when I believe that more evidence exists for latter statement). But being young in times of globalisation, individualisation, pluralisation and virtualisation in an achievement-oriented, consumer, network, risk and migration society means that more opportunities for young people are being complemented based by even more challenges and duties.

During the second half of the 20th century freedom of decision became greater for more and more people. They were no longer obliged to live their lives as if they were predestined by birth to live in certain social surroundings. The influence of the social structure of society on people's future and chances did not vanish, but their degree of freedom of decision increased remarkably. This trend, called individualisation, allows people to decide for themselves in many areas of life and they are no longer forced to act only according to traditions and in the same way as people from the same background. Nowadays people have the chance to decide on but are also responsible for their own educational paths, their own way into the labour market, their own legal status, their own health, their way of life and even their own sexual identity. Consequently lifestyles can be chosen – if not completely freely and independently of social and cultural background – and social structure is not the only discriminatory factor in society. The *hexis* – described by Bourdieu (1982) as an outcome of cultural and economic capital as well as leisure activities, behaviour and even attitudes – can be chosen more freely nowadays than it could 40 years ago.

Bauman (2009) noted that even values and attitudinal behaviour can, since they may be chosen, be nothing more than a symbol for a certain lifestyle group, just like a certain outfit or a certain music preference would be. The reason why people display various forms of behaviour lies in a tendency of the consumer society that forces everybody to become not only consumers but at the same time goods or rather brands, as Bauman explains. All of us who are living in consumer societies are not only used to using and consuming the varieties of things on offer – from clothing to food, from electronics to furniture and from information to culture. We use them as an investment in our own market value as brands in the consumer society; our consumption becomes the showroom of ourself, which is our own brand, for the market. Therefore we present certain facets of ourself to the market for the “consumer” we expect in this market: when trying to find a new job, we will present our knowledge and skills rather than our music preferences; when we want to find a new partner we will rather show our dancing skills and family attitudes than our puzzle skills and sporting interests (or the other way round – depending on the partner we want to find, and what we believe makes us irresistible for this particular one). If we want to gain respect in our group of friends we present certain values, certain behaviour, and on the other hand tend to hide certain preferences, be they for music or books. So the presentation of ourselves depends on the market we are in and the consumers we want to reach, and thus even the attitudes we have (since we present them) might depend on the values of customers in the market we expect. Bauman does not claim that this is a conscious process, but it still happens.

The presentation of the self and the reaction of others, the audience, form the process of socialisation and thus identity creation, as described by Erving Goffman (1959) in his theory of symbolic interaction. This process of presenting and adjusting the presentation according to the reaction of the audience, also described as “impression management”, has gained more and more recognition by the public and it seems people react consciously according to this credo. Therefore this identity-creating role-playing is becoming more and more common among people but often it remains unclear who the important audience is, whose reactions influence the self-presentation. So the style, behaviour, patterns of consumption and even attitudes are significant symbols in this presentation.

The Internet and especially online social communities like Facebook, Myspace or LinkedIn have created a new form of public space for self-presentation. Here it is common to present leisure activities, music preferences or cultural interests, as well as one's education or professional position. Our legal status, sexual orientation and values and attitudes are also presented via social networks like Facebook, Myspace or Tumblr. These various facets of a self and an identity are presented voluntarily and consciously – and they evoke reactions from the audience: people comment or even share one's status, add like statements or links, or leave the friends list because they do not appreciate certain statements. Illouz (2012) points out that this form of self-presentation in electronic media also has an influence on offline relationships. Since online representation constantly asks for positive feedback by the audience, people get used to and depend on the culture of positive affirmation in offline relationships too. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that in the time of online social communities, all facets of a person are visible to everyone simultaneously and permanently. In the past, people presented various facets of their selves too, but consecutively, and only those people who were actually present could see a certain facet. And the Internet as a stage for self-presentation has fostered a trend towards self-portraits taken with a digital camera, often with the smartphone, and put online on a social network – the “selfies”. Thus the electronic media serve as a new platform to present all facets of oneself and one can permanently receive affirmation or critical feedback that can be considered in further self-representation.

The range of choice, or rather the inspiration for a certain decision, derives not only from the traditional culture of the region, or even of the country people are born in, but it can come instead from anywhere in the world. Globalisation, migration and the network society (Castells 1996) changed and widened the offers in the supermarket of attitudes and styles, just as they did for music and fashion. Cultural exchange intensified because of globalisation, migration and media. International media companies transmit not only regional news but broaden the range of information and culture visible to people. Culture-pessimistic analyses of this trend observe the loss of local cultures to global Western – normally American – culture, and thus see a loss of local and regional identity. And regional traditions too gain a bigger audience via the globalised media industry but especially because of the Internet, which allows user-generated content. The World Wide Web now allows us to get information from everywhere and to inform ourselves about our own way of living.

Another trend promoting the diversity in the Western world is the change in the concept of migration and integration. Integration still requires a good command of the language of the host society, but the need to have contact and exchange with people from the host society outside of education and the labour market has grown less urgent. Migrants do not have to adapt completely to the host society any longer, but can quite easily keep contact with their own (or their predecessor's) culture and traditions. Modern communication media allow the maintenance of contact with people from the same cultural background all over the world, and some migrant groups in host countries have grown in size, allowing interpersonal private contact to be kept more or less only inside the same culture. Therefore the variety of elements of different cultures that can be found in a small region has increased over the last few decades. In some countries conservative politicians and analysts point to the alleged development of parallel

societies. Liberal migration policy and multiculturalism are commonly blamed for this development, which is held responsible for the increase in violence, unemployment, poverty or the loss of “native” traditions, culture and community feeling.

Furthermore, international media and the Internet foster knowledge about the economic and ecological interdependencies of countries, people and actions around the globe. Nowadays, more and more people in Europe are aware that their consumption behaviour can have tremendous effects in other world regions. These effects can be both on the economy and on the ecological conditions in other parts of the world and can be positive or negative. Consequently these local or regional developments might change the conditions for the world economy, and can influence world climate and thus migration trends. These interdependencies existed before as well, but knowledge about them was less common. Recently, this awareness of the consequences of one’s own behaviour for the whole world has led to self-reflection and even to conscious consumption.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF IN YOUTH CULTURES

This short description of the recent situation should set the framework for an analysis of youth cultures and scenes where the various approaches to health, the body and to sustainable consumption can be focused on. Youth cultural scenes are defined as networks of people who share certain forms of a material and/or mental collective style. This collective style is put on stage, presented and developed in typical places, at typical times, and/or in typical media (Hitzler et al. 2001). Contrary to traditional youth organisations, these scenes are fluid both in their symbols and in young people’s affection for them. Youth cultural scenes are – as networks – defined by weak ties among the members and self-defined attachment to the scene. Thus, these youth scenes function as places for socialisation, as do families, friends, school or work settings or organisations, but since the ties in and to the scene are self-defined, the setting of youth cultural scenes allows more freedom for both autonomous role playing and identity work (Grossegger et al. 2001). Generally, socialisation means the integration of any person into a society. It is the process of acquiring the knowledge and skills to understand the values and follow the rules in certain groups, to enable one to participate in this setting and also to fulfil the expectations of other people as to a certain role in a given setting.

Youth scenes have three different pillars (Zentner 2008) or elements that can be described for every scene. Youth scenes are not only networks of people who look similar. Research shows that people in a certain scene share not only style preferences but also a correlation with attitudes and values. Furthermore, typical forms of bonding models can be found in scenes. For example, hip-hop is not only defined by rap, break dance, graffiti and fashion, but followers of hip-hop typically long for respect for their authentic behaviour and the feeling of belonging to smaller groups, a gang or a “posse” is characteristic. Youth culture research cannot explain if there is any causality between scene belonging and values, but it can highlight correlations.

For this paper, the connection between health behaviour, body image or conscious consumption and youth cultural scenes and certain phenomena is of interest.

I'M TOO SEXY FOR MY SHIRT – IDENTITY CREATION IN YOUTH CULTURAL SCENES

It seems that during the last three decades the importance of the body as a key element of the self has grown and thus its involvement in the presentation of self has become more essential. This could be derived from the fact that even in mainstream media, such as TV, as well as new media formats, there exists a focus (primarily) on the presentation of health, looks, and the body. Among these formats are TV series such as *Nip/Tuck*, model casting shows or reality formats where body improvement and aesthetic surgeries are the main topics. Health and fitness programmes are no longer informative – and rather boring – presentations or discussion rounds by various medics, but are “reality shows” presenting people who want to lose weight, live healthily or cope with their ill-health. This trend towards the growing importance of the body can also be observed in the behaviour of people, especially young people. More and more people are investing in aesthetic surgery, go to fitness centres or undertake body modification, such as tattooing. The public presentation of the body has also changed. Fashion allows showing well-trained muscles, flat bellies or artificially improved body parts, as well as tattoos and piercings. Irrespective of whether people go out to dance in a club, do sports or go to work, clothing is cut to present the body, and it is socially acceptable to present it. Thus, one can observe that the body becomes a medium. Some recent media reports have focused on a new trend in men’s self-presentation called “spornosexuality”. Spornosexuality can be understood as the successor of the 90s trend of metrosexuality, when men started to take care of their body by caring about weight, using lotions and investing in haircuts and clothing. Spornosexuality takes this one step further as men shave their body hair and train their bodies to have well-defined abdominal muscles because they “have to” look like sportsmen or porn actors (thus the name spornosexuality).

This growth of importance of the body was the basis for the success of the fitness scene. More and more young people declared themselves to be part of the fitness scene, and over the years the average age in the scene has decreased, as studies on youth cultures among 10- to 30-year-olds in Austria showed. The data also showed that a higher percentage of young men compared to women are part of the scene and it also indicates that young people with migrant backgrounds are represented more than in other youth cultures. The data also showed a high correlation between “being in the fitness scene” and agreement with the statement that “people who look good have better chances in the labour market”. The inclination to have cosmetic surgery and also to use dietary supplements is higher than average. So one can deduce that placing a high level of importance on looks and the body not only automatically implies a healthy lifestyle and a high level of health awareness, but also the will to be successful at work. It is interesting that this element of success is also highlighted in an analysis of the TV format of model casting shows (Stach 2013). It is particularly important that the facial expressions of the young candidates should not reveal any strain during the challenging tasks that they have to perform during the show, to give the appearance that they find the task easy.

Another interesting element in the fitness culture is the egocentric (though not automatically egoistic) attitude. The individual is of the utmost importance in the culture.

“It is your own body and it is you who is in charge of it and who is responsible for how it looks”, is a key message in the fitness scene. And that is also evident when you have a closer look at the setting in fitness centres: the machines are parallel to each other; a monitor for the individual choice of supporting entertainment is in front of each machine; the people are concentrated on their own movements, at their own speed, their own rhythm; personal trainers – even if every user of a fitness club has the same one – are here to give advice to one single person at a time. So we can see that the whole stage is set up to promote the individual and the power to make it on his or her own. Regarding this individual approach, the fitness culture is different from other forms of body-centred scenes such as beach volleyball, and even the approach of CrossFit (which does not show the characteristics of a scene yet) is completely different. In CrossFit the group is important, even though not everybody does the same at the same time, but success is easier in the group and the group supports the individual.

This individualistic self-centred approach in the fitness scene might explain the higher representation of people from socially disadvantaged groups than in other scenes. Since everyone has the power over his or her own body, it needs “only” self-discipline, the will to train and the time it takes and one will see positive results. Thus the message in the fitness scene is: “I did this myself, I managed that, I alone was successful and I can also do it outside the fitness studio in the labour market”.

In other sports scenes the guiding values normally differ strongly from those in the fitness scene. In beach volleyball, which is also a highly expressive body- and looks-centred culture, one doesn’t see this focus on success and achievement. Here, partying, a good mood and an easy-going attitude seem more central. Furthermore, the way the female body in particular is presented in the media is far more sexualised, and therefore many claim that the scene is sexist. As in the fitness scene, health issues, besides a “well-defined” body, are not more important for the average young person. A healthy lifestyle is also not the driver for being part of broader scenes like surfing or skateboarding. On the contrary, skateboarders or snowboarders tend to display risk behaviour closely connected to the sport. Skateboarders are not afraid of sports injuries, but they are rather proud if they have some scratches or sometimes even more severe injuries. Such cuts and bruises, shown when boarding, are again proof of devotion to training and the almost obsessive wish to improve skills. Thus, skateboarders are happy to see sports injuries as the price they pay on their way to perfection.

Gender roles and stereotypes are the main elements in various youth scenes. In sports scenes girls are often either a decorative surplus (like cheerleaders in American football) or distracting elements (like the “Betties” in skateboarding)³⁷, or reduced to their looks and not their achievements. In many music scenes too we find stereotypes, not only in the lyrics but also in the presentation of the musicians and dancers. The most explicit recent model of this is hip-hop, where females are presented in

37. Skateboarders often called girls in the scene “Betty” if they were more interested in the boarders than in boarding. It is good if girls are also in the audience and admire the skills of the boarders, but, “Betties are dangerous if they want to distract the boarders [from] the really important things in life; then you cannot accept them”, as a Viennese boarder aged 13 once explained in an interview, referring to skateboarding as the “real[ly] important thing”.

an over-sexualised way, offering their bodies to a man who is in charge and able to have all the girls (irrespective of his own looks, skills, behaviour or charms). In some lyrics of gangsta rap songs females are even blamed for aggressive or violent behaviour against them (Herschelmann 2013). So the stereotypes are very clear and also include body images. Women should have flat bellies, big breasts, slender legs and nice buttocks, and should use these body parts to please a man – at least this is the model presented in music videos. One symbol for this role of females in the scene was “twerking”, the lascivious rotating dance movement. This symbol became a mainstream phenomenon, even outside hip-hop, featuring in, for example, Miley Cyrus’ music videos. It should be remembered, however, that the body has been an expressive element in music for a long time, though gender stereotypes were not always promoted and consolidated, certainly not across all musical styles.

A youth culture that is not focused on the body image but still on the body is LOHAS – Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability. This lifestyle is more interesting for young adults than for teenagers but still can be counted within youth cultural phenomena. This lifestyle can be characterised by conscious consumption in various areas. Among these are ecological and social sustainability of production, preference for regional products but also healthy living conditions, use of renewable energy and others. People who see themselves as LOHAS claim that their approach to sustainability does not imply abstinence from consumption but consideration of the production methods and options for recycling and energy usage when deciding for or against a given product or brand. Thus, LOHAS can use electronic goods or wear designer clothing if they are produced, shipped and sold in coherence with values of sustainability. Nevertheless, people committed to LOHAS often live as vegetarians or vegans, since the production of these food products needs less energy and produces less harmful by-products than meat or fish. Personal health and well-being are also important for those following LOHAS, therefore they often do relaxation sports like Tai Chi or Yoga. The LOHAS values are typically post-materialistic, as described by Inglehart (1982). Inglehart differentiated between materialistic values and post-materialistic values, where the former is described by the search of the individual for economic security and the wish to gain wealth, make a career, have a nice house and possess status symbols. The latter is described as those values that can gain importance only if materialistic needs are fulfilled. These values include self-realisation, participation, global solidarity and justice. Thus LOHAS followers tend to be post-materialistic, which consequently explains why socially disadvantaged people seldom seek out a LOHAS lifestyle. Youth scenes that can be seen as an introductory form to the lifestyle of LOHAS are the “Ecos” and “Alternatives”. But in these scenes a healthy lifestyle is not a defining element of the values; Ecos focus on ecological sustainability and often animal rights, while Alternatives concentrate on economic justice and are against the economic primacy of globalisation. Both of these scenes are also very critical of fashion and brands and tend to present themselves in no-name and or second-hand clothes. On the other hand, for those concerned with LOHAS it is important to have decent and fashionable clothing as well.

All in all, we can find some youth cultural scenes that do care about health, the body and the universe, but not all of them with similar attitudes or aims. Nevertheless all the scenes mentioned communicate their attitudes via various symbols such as a trained

body, sexualised presentation of body parts or ostentatious conscious consumption. However, besides the culturally embedded behaviour, we can see attitudes or behaviour independent of the youth cultural scene, particularly in the online world.

(UN-)HEALTHY BEHAVIOUR ONLINE

Health and body images are not only key elements in certain youth cultural scenes. The importance of these topics can also be seen in other – often youth-related – phenomena like self-presentation and presentation of others, but also in the online discussion and presentation of nutritional trends and even of eating disorders.

We can observe a trend towards presenting oneself online and sending self-portraits via mobile phone that has gained momentum over the last five to seven years, especially with the growing importance of smartphones. This form of visual self-presentation led to the hype of selfies. In the beginning these selfies were nothing more than pictures of oneself but they became an art form, with various modes of composition being fashionable for a short time. For self-portraits the “duck face” was at one point very popular, as was the nude self-presentation of the back some years ago, made trendy by Scarlett Johansson. Recently the exposure of colleagues, ex-friends or ex-partners by presenting embarrassing (often nude and/or sexual) pictures in online communities became a phenomenon of online mobbing (also) among youth. Such incidents, called “sexting”, expose the body of a person and thus damage the reputation of that person. Here it becomes obvious that the situation is perceived as more incriminating than the body image is supportive, and the negative impact strikes the victim harder than the perpetrator, who – in most cases – was involved in the scene as well. This is a phenomenon that needs further research on the modes of perception and of assessment in such situations. Online mobbing, being an important element in psychological problems and mental disease of young people, is a more general form of negative exposure than sexting. In the study “EU Kids Online II” (Livingstone et al. 2011) it is stated that approximately every seventh young person has already received sexual messages or pictures, but only 3% confirmed that they had already sent such messages. In a recent Austrian study 30% of interviewees aged 14 to 18 claimed that it is normal to send nude or almost-nude pictures of themselves to a partner (saferinternet.at/jugendkultur.at, 2015).

Another model of the presentation of health and body image in virtual surroundings is online interest groups on eating disorders. These communities were in the beginning a kind of online support group for concerned people where they could exchange their experiences and gain mutual understanding and support. However, these groups become problematic if the online support starts contradicting medical treatment offline. In particular, “pro-ana” and “pro-mia” blogs and communities promote diseases and eating disorders as desirable lifestyles. Pictures, stories and advice that inspire people – but primarily young females – to become and stay thin are the main element of these webspaces. These “thinspiration” pictures show very thin (often anorexic) models professionally styled and set on stage by professional photographers. Such pictures illustrate a “lifestyle” of anorexia nervosa, portrayed as preferable and not unhealthy. Thus eating disorders are presented as widespread and normal and their risks are trivialised and played down.

A similar effect of belittlement and feigned normality is created with videos of risk behaviour in street traffic, such as speeding. Other forms of risky behaviour are also presented online via videos, pictures or text and might thus have an effect as models for other young people. This possible effect is mentioned by some pedagogues, who refer to the dissemination of videos and pictures of risky behaviour, from unsafe sex to violence and from substance misuse to auto-aggression. Obviously such media dissemination exists online, and its effect and impact on youth behaviour has yet to be analysed in further research.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can see that health and the body have become elements of the self-presentation to an audience on- and offline and induces reactions that influence the further identity creation of young people. Consumer behaviour too, has become an element in the creation of the self-image for public gaze and thus an element of self-expression. The body has become an instrument for communication and a symbol of success and of (apparently) healthy living.

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